
Reciprocal and Non-reciprocal Discourse to the Teaching of Speaking in China

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Abstract:

Various approaches can be applied to speaking in TEFL. As TEFL teachers, only by understanding what the different approaches are, what positive or negative role each approach contains, and how the appropriate approach may be related to the teaching practice, can better teaching and learning effect be achieved. This article, by means of defining two approaches, reciprocal discourse and non-reciprocal discourse, as well as analyzing the features and the implications of each discourse respectively, draws the conclusion that reciprocal discourse achieves better learning results, and non-reciprocal discourse can be used, to some extent, to supplement the teaching in the current China.

Key words: Reciprocal discourse, Non-reciprocal discourse, Speaking

Bygate (1987: vii) comments “speaking is a skill which deserves attention every bit as much as literary skills”, therefore TEFL (teaching English as a foreign language) teachers are supposed to pay adequate attention to helping students achieve the skill. This article will begin by the current China’s specific teaching context, then in order to discuss the application of the two discourses (reciprocal and non-reciprocal) in the teaching of speaking in Chinese universities, this article will respectively define each discourse, analyze the features and illustrate the implication.

1. CURRENT CHINA’S SPECIFIC TEACHING CONTEXT

In most of Chinese universities, non-English-major students are required to spend 4 hours per week on English learning at school, in which two hours is for the teaching of listening and speaking, and the teaching of listening always takes more time in class comparing to the teaching of speaking. One reason is that speaking has not extensively involved into the examination system, therefore TEFL teachers are not motivated to put a lot of effort on the teaching of speaking. Meanwhile the English class for non-English-major students usually contains fifty or even sixty students, so it’s easy for TEFL teachers to manage listening tasks than speaking tasks in such a large class. Also we have to admit the fact that many TEFL teachers lack the approaches or techniques on how to teach speaking in class.

Comparing to TEFL teachers’ reluctance and pressure of teaching speaking in class, university students, however, have quite a lot of motivation in grasping speaking ability. The reason is that speaking English fluently and communicating well with others in English tend to guarantee Chinese University students good job opportunities when they graduate. While here is a strange phenomenon, though Chinese students have realized the importance of English speaking and determine to learn it well, many of them lack the confidence in speaking English, they dare not speak in case making mistakes, and they rely on their teachers too much instead of acquiring the ability independently.

2. RECIPROCAL DISCOURSE

According to Cook (1989: 60), Bygate (1987:8), Buck (2001:12) and Hedge (2000: 235-236), reciprocal discourse refers to a two-way discourse, in which both speaker and listener interact in order to establish and maintain social relations or exchange information. During the process, the listener and speaker change roles, back and forth, and they collaborate together to manage the conversation. In the real life, there are many examples of reciprocal discourse, such as chatting with a close friend on the phone, talking to a stranger at a party, negotiating with a business partner in a meeting and so forth.

2.1. Features of reciprocal discourse

First, one obvious feature of reciprocal discourse is the use of interaction routines, which, according to Bygate (1987:23-25) and Nunan (1998:40), refer to conventional ways of

presenting sociocultural information. Interaction routines are naturally obeyed by native speakers. When they produce a conversation, they know what they should say in greetings, invitations, compliments and so on. During the process, the participants either maintain or establish a kind of social relation to each other.

Second, participants in the reciprocal discourse take turns constantly, which guarantees the continuity of the conversation. The speaker may change the role to become the listener and the listener becomes the speaker. But it is essential that only one person speak at a time. Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000:173) comment “Members of a speech community know how to participate in this type of exchange by adhering to turn-taking rules that are appropriate in their community, by allowing overlap to occur between utterances, and by using pausing lengths that are compatible with their particular sociocultural norms.” For example, people use facial or other gestures to indicate a wish to take a turn, or use a pause to provide an opportunity for someone to take up a turn.

Third, repair is a crucial element in reciprocal discourse, which “refers to efforts by both parties in conversation to correct problems that arise” (Richards, 1990:71). In a conversation, because of the slip of tongue, the noise, the vocabulary chosen, the common information shared and so on, it is possible that the speaker might not make himself understood and the listener might not understand the speaker. Therefore, the speaker needs to “adjust his vocabulary and message to take the listener into account”(Bygate, 1987:8), and the listener needs to “make appropriate request for clarification, back-channelling” (Buck, 2001:12). For example: A: *Will you leave here in fall?* B: *Fall...ee...?* A: *Will you not be here in autumn?* Thus by means of repairs, the participants can understand each other, which guarantees the conversation to continue smoothly.

Fourth, participants in a reciprocal discourse need to manage the topic, which is defined as “agenda management” by Bygate (1987: 36). It covers what topic the participants choose, how they develop the topic, and how long they spend on the topic. Coulthard (1977: 75-76) comments “An initial question is what sort of things can and do form topics in conversation”. Some topics are not relevant to particular conversation and the suitability of other topics depends on the person one is talking to. We experience, see, hear about events all the time. Some are tellable to everyone, some have a restricted audience, some must be told immediately, and some can wait and still retain their interest.

At the same time, Brown and Yule (1983: 11) find that when people meet for the first time, it is common that “one person offers a topic for comment by the other person, responds to the other person if his topic is successful, or proffers another topic if it is not”. For example: A: *It's hot, isn't it?* B: *Oh, yes, last year....* Thus the topic builds a bridge for the strangers. Furthermore, Brown and Yule (1983:11) report that reciprocal discourse is “frequently characterized by constantly shifting topics and a great deal of agreement on them.”

Last, another distinct feature of reciprocal discourse is the speech style. In a conversation, the participants need to take notice of what previous speakers have said when planning their own contribution, therefore the extent to which it is possible to plan what to say in advance is rather limited. It results in that the sentences in a reciprocal discourse are relatively short and the speaker naturally applies some unique interactive expressions, such as *well, oh, mm, really, actually, yes*. (Brown and Yule, 1983)

2.2. The implication of reciprocal discourse in language teaching and learning

In my teaching context, unfortunately, due to the short teaching time, the over-sized language classroom, the specific examination system and the lack of the approaches to speaking teaching (some TEFL teachers still hold the out-of-date concept of equaling speaking to reciting), reciprocal discourse is seldom taught nor practiced in the classroom. In fact, reciprocal discourse plays a significant role in developing students' fluency in speaking, and it is not a random exchange of speech between the participants, but following rules, therefore it should and must have its position in the classroom. In order to help students have the ability to produce proper reciprocal discourse, TEFL teachers should bear several things in mind.

2.2.1. Students should have the strategies.

Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) put forward the importance of speaking strategies in the development of fluency. In line with the features of reciprocal discourse, TEFL teachers ought to help students acquire the strategies for turn-taking, topic management, repair and so on.

On teaching reciprocal discourse, Richards (1990) recommends two approaches. One is the indirect approach, which means teaching through interactive tasks, and the other is the direct approach, which means explicitly teaching strategies. Relating to my teaching context, the combination of the two will get better teaching and learning effect.

On turn-taking

Hedge (2000:268) comments that "students often report that one of their greatest difficulties is entering a conversation." Slade (1986:79) makes the similar comment, he reports that "A learner who mistimes his entry into a conversation or who is unfamiliar with the correct formulae can give the impression of being pushy or, conversely, over-reticent". Therefore it is necessary for the teacher to help students acquire the ability of organizing turn-taking.

According to Bygate (1987:39), efficient turn-taking requires five abilities. First, students should know how to signal that they want to speak, by using appropriate phrases, sounds, or even gestures. Second, students should recognize the right moment to get the turn. Thirdly, students should know how to use appropriate turn structures in order to use their turn properly and not lose it before finishing what they are saying. Fourthly, students should recognize other people's signal of their desire to speak. And last, students should know how to let someone else have a turn.

To help students be able to organize the turns, TEFL teachers should firstly rise students' awareness, talking to and telling them what they should do or not do in the conversation and then practice the skills in classroom activities.

On managing topics

TEFL teachers should make students know how to begin a conversation, (such as "*lovely day, isn't it?*") how to end a conversation, (such as "*I really have to be going now, I've got some work to do.*") and how to shift to another topic. (such as "*By the way, ...*") At the same time, these expressions should be introduced in the context.

Moreover, teachers should help students broaden their topics, thus the strategies can be practiced in various situations. Hatch (1978) suggests that second language learners need a wide range of topics at their disposal. To this point, Richards (1990: 71) makes the similar comment. "Although they may get by with their ability to answer questions about recurring topics, such as how long they have been in the country, their occupation, and family, learners need practice in introducing new topics into conversation in order to move beyond this stage."

On repairs and speech style

To make the conversation continue smoothly, TEFL teachers should talk with students about how to check that someone has understood, (such as: *OK? Do you follow me?*) how to ask for repetition, (such as *Sorry? Pardon?*) and how to use the interactive expressions, (such as *really, actually*).

To practice the above strategies, a series of classroom activities are indispensable, such as group discussion. The teacher divides students into small groups, asking each group to choose a topic, telling students that they can say anything in English on this topic, and explaining to them that the purpose of this activity is to practice how to communicate with others. Then students discuss within the groups. During the process, students will use the strategy on turn-taking, since they want to take a turn, hold a turn or relinquish the turn. They will use the strategy on repairs, since they need to negotiate the meaning. They will use the strategy on topic-managing, since they need to shift to other opinions.

2.2.2. Students should have the knowledge of culture.

When producing the reciprocal discourse, having the knowledge of culture is also significant. Delanoy (1997:60) comments "cultural learning is now viewed as an integral part of communicative language learning." Chinese students share different cultures with those in English speaking countries, therefore TEFL teachers should provide opportunities for students to learn the culture and cross the culture bound.

First, students should know that what topics they should choose. Hedge, (2000: 268) comments "Perhaps the first demand on learners of English is to know which topics are appropriate with which kinds of people." Richards (1990:70) reports "questions concerning one's age, salary and marital status may be appropriate on the first encounters in some cultures, but not in others."

Second, students should know the fixed interaction routines. For example, a justification rather than an apology might be given after receiving a complaint. “Such responses usually require more careful formulation and students need to learn and practice the necessary language.” (Hedge, 2000: 267)

To make students achieve the culture awareness, teachers should apply a series of activities, such as role-play. The teacher divides students into pairs, telling them that they are strangers meeting in the birthday party, and asking them to choose proper language to develop the conversation. During the process, students will consider the topic as well as the routines. Fantini (1997:41) comments “language work is always complemented by explicit attention to sociolinguistic aspects, cultural aspects.”

2.2.3. Students should have confidence.

“The adjustment-in-interaction may be crucial to language development, for it leads to noticing discrepancies between what is said and what is heard, and to a resolution of these discrepancies.” (Van Lier, 1988:180-182)

But most Chinese students are timid, who are nervous when being asked and afraid to express that they do not understand. Hatch (1978: 434) comments “Nothing stops the opportunity to carry on a conversation quicker than silence or the use of ‘yes’ and head-nodding when the learner does not understand.” Therefore TEFL teachers should increase students’ confidence by telling them that adjustment is the common phenomenon in a conversation. At the same time, teachers should encourage students to find another way to express themselves when being asked or finding the listener confused and to show directly when they cannot understand.

3. NON-RECIPROCAL DISCOURSE

According to Cook (1989: 60), Bygate (1987:8), Buck (2001:12) and Hedge (2000: 235-236), non-reciprocal discourse refers to a one-way discourse, in which speaker and listener may have no opportunity for interaction. The main purpose of non-reciprocal discourse is to deliver and receive messages. In the real life, there are many examples of non-reciprocal discourse, such as making a speech in the meeting, giving a lecture, telling a story and so forth.

3.1. Features of non-reciprocal discourse

First, compared to reciprocal discourse, non-reciprocal discourse does not involve interaction routines, it emphasizes on information routines, however. According to Bygate (1987: 23) and Nunan (1998:40), information routines refer to “frequently recurring types of information structures, including stories, descriptions of places and people; presentation of facts; comparisons; instruction.” For example, when telling a story, the speaker should talk about the setting (time and place) and the event. When giving instructions, the speaker needs to provide sequences.

Second, unlike reciprocal discourse, in non-reciprocal discourse a single speaker is involved, who has the right to speak most of the time, while the listener is required nothing more than to interpret the speaker's utterance. The whole process is the process of delivering information rather than making social interaction.

Last, in contrast to reciprocal discourse, non-reciprocal discourse would seem easier to plan what to say in advance, since the chance of having to make major changes in what has been planned, as a result of other people's contribution, is far smaller. Therefore, the sentences used in non-reciprocal discourse are relatively longer than those used in reciprocal discourse, and the structures are much more complex in non-reciprocal discourse.

3.2. The implication of non-reciprocal discourse in language teaching and learning

In my teaching context, non-reciprocal discourse is frequently applied in the teaching of speaking. Teachers ask students to tell stories, describe pictures, repeat what they hear, or make instructions, but the teaching result is not satisfying. Through analyzing non-reciprocal discourse, a lot of enlightenment can be got by TEFL teachers.

First, besides reciprocal discourse, non-reciprocal discourse also needs strategies. Thereby teachers should introduce the strategies on how to organize the non-reciprocal discourse, how to distribute the time, and how to make what they prepare for coherent, rather than simply asking students to recite the story or the instruction. At the same time, teachers should provide students with opportunity of practicing these strategies.

Second, teachers should put emphasis on fluency more than accuracy. Richards (1990:76) comments "accuracy is seen as a component of fluency, rather than as an independent dimension of conversation skill." Therefore TEFL teachers should not correct students' errors when they are telling the story or doing the presentation. Otherwise, students will feel frustrated and unconfident.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, by means of analyzing the concept of reciprocal discourse and non-reciprocal discourse in relation to speaking, it can be realized that in order to help students develop the speaking ability and acquire the communicative competence, TEFL teachers in my teaching context should create more possibilities of applying the reciprocal discourse approach in the language classroom, also non-reciprocal discourse is still needed, especially for the over-sized language classroom. Meanwhile, TEFL teachers ought to develop their techniques of applying proper methods to developing students' fluency in speaking.

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